PART TWO
THEMATIC AND HAGIOGRAPHICAL STUDIES
CHAPTER SEVEN

FAZANG THE PHILOSOPHER

The Avatamsaka tradition usually conceives of the cosmos with an infinite number of interdependent and interpenetrating components; these make a web of connections of immeasurable magnitude. The Avatamsaka literature frequently deploys the metaphor of Indra’s Net (Ch. yintuoluowang 因陀羅網) to demonstrate the simultaneous, mutual identity and mutual causality of all phenomena. The aptest explanation of this often misunderstood metaphor remains the one Francis Cook first made almost thirty years ago:

Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net which has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of the deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each “eye” of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.¹

As the cornerstone of the Avatamsaka philosophical and religious system, the worldview symbolized by the metaphor of Indra’s Net has been the beneficiary of sustained scholarly attention for some time.² This chapter addresses the issues with a different approach. I will discuss the formation and development of two celebrated stories related to Fazang’s effort to expound on this fundamental Avatamsaka view.

¹ Cook, Hua-yen Buddhism, 2.
² Cook, Hua-yen Buddhism; Fang Litian (coll. and annot.), Huayan jinshizi zhang jiaozhu; Stefano Zacchetti provides an annotated Italian translation of Jin shizi zhang (with introduction) in Fazang—Il trattato del leone d’oro.